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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 004526

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [QA](#) [JO](#)

SUBJECT: GOJ RECALLS AMBASSADOR TO QATAR FOR CONSULTATIONS,
CLOSES AL-JAZEERA OFFICE FOLLOWING INFLAMMATORY EPISODE OF
"OPPOSITE DIRECTION"

Classified By: DEPUTY CHIEF OF MISSION GREGORY L. BERRY REASONS: 1.5(
b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY. The Government of Jordan closed the al-Jazeera office in Amman on August 7 and subsequently recalled its Ambassador to Qatar for consultations in response to an "inflammatory" episode of "Opposite Direction" by al-Jazeera. The program featured a guest who was aggressively critical of the Hashemite regime, accusing it of colluding with Israel, Great Britain and the United States to subdue and oppress the Palestinian people. Across-the-spectrum Jordanian media response to the program has been supportive of the Hashemite family and the GOJ. This is the latest instance in the sometimes stormy relationship between the GOJ and al-Jazeera, and hardens the GOJ belief that the Qataris are using al-Jazeera as a mouthpiece to irritate rival Arab nations such as Jordan. END SUMMARY

GUEST ON PROGRAM: THE HASHEMITE
FAMILY IS NO FRIEND TO THE ARABS

12. (SBU) Assad Abu Khalil, an Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of California-Berkley, played the Hashemite family during the August 6 segment of the popular al-Jazeera program "al-Itijah al-Moakez" (Opposite Direction). The segment, broadcast throughout the Arab world, was supposed to be a discussion of Jordan's position on potential USG action against Iraq. However, Khalil accused the Hashemites of essentially being co-conspirators with the Israelis against the Arab world. Khalil asserted that King Abdullah "does not speak on behalf of any Arab man or woman", and that the late King Hussein had received money from the CIA. His basic message was that the Hashemite family, for nearly 100 years, has been anti-Palestinian and in cahoots with the Israelis, British, and the USG. He said that the credibility of King Abdullah was "at rock bottom" in the Arab world, and accused him of "subservience" to the USG.

13. (SBU) Khalil's co-guest, former Jordanian parliamentarian Mahmoud Kharabsheh, was often off-balance and defensive in his attempts to protect the image of the Hashemite family as well as Jordan's intelligence services (which were also criticized by Khalil). The show fielded callers, one of which was Sameer Hiyari, a reporter for the Jordanian newspaper "al-Rai'i". In a rant that was so loud it was barely understandable, Hiyari lambasted Khalil and rose to the defense of the Hashemite family. (Note: "Opposite Direction" is one of the original al-Jazeera programs that propelled it to its current popularity. It is similar to CNN's "Crossfire" and routinely indulges in raucous guests and inflammatory topics, often at the expense of sitting Arab governments).

GOJ CLOSES LOCAL OFFICE OF AL JAZEERA,
AIRS TELEVISION SEGMENT OF ITS OWN.

14. (SBU) Following the initial airing of the program, the GOJ closed the Amman office of al-Jazeera on August 7 "indefinitely" (note: The program has been re-aired at least once by al-Jazeera since the closing of the Amman office). Jordan's official Petra news organization reported that the GOJ withdrew al-Jazeera's license to operate as well as their correspondents' media credentials. Local media editorials, across the political spectrum, have roundly criticized al-Jazeera and Khalil's attack upon the royal family. Rumors have already been spun accusing Khalil of having a "Zionist" wife who was expelled from Jordan several years ago. On August 8, Jordan TV aired a program in an effort to counter Khalil's accusations and allowed viewers to call in. A few former GOJ ministers and Kharabsheh appeared during the one hour segment and fielded phone calls from a supportive Jordanian public.

15. (C) On August 8, a senior MFA official told POLCOUNS that FonMin Muasher had convoked the Qatari ambassador that day and expressed the GOJ's extreme displeasure with al-Jazeera and, by extension, the GOQ. The official told us that he had rarely seen Muasher so tough or emotional delivering a

demarche. POLCOUNS cautioned that the closure of the al-Jazeera office would raise questions in the international media about Jordan's freedom of the press and developing democracy.

QATARI SILENCE LEADS TO RECALL OF JORDANIAN AMBASSADOR

16. (C) On August 10, the GOJ recalled its ambassador to Qatar, Omar Amad, for consultations. On August 11, FM Muasher told the DCM that "Jordan isn't buying the Qatari claim of al-Jazeera's independence over editorial content." The GOJ, Muasher said, had demanded that the GOQ issue a public statement distancing itself from the views expressed on al-Jazeera. When this failed to appear, the Jordanians decided to recall their ambassador to Doha. Muasher insisted the GOQ was using al-Jazeera as a mouthpiece because it feels excluded from Arab councils on major regional issues, particularly the MEPP. The FM gave no indication of how long Amad will remain in Amman for consultations.

COMMENT

17. (C) This is not the first time the GOJ has butted heads with al-Jazeera. The news agency has routinely run stories the GOJ considered to be slanted against Jordan and the Royal Family, and "Opposite Direction" has repeatedly addressed controversial topics regarding Jordan. Closing the local al-Jazeera office is not unprecedented; in 1998 the GOJ shut the office briefly after a similar incident. Jordanian media have closed ranks behind the government and its reaction, certainly because of government urging, but also as a general circling of the wagons against allegations perceived as highly inappropriate. At the same time, some journalists have used the controversy to renew calls for a more open media environment in Jordan as a way to lessen the attractiveness and influence of foreign satellite channels such as al-Jazeera.
Gnehm